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ABSTRACT

Constructive controversy has many benefits in the classroom. The benefits of constructive controversy, however, depend on the way the teacher structures the controversy, the skill level of the students, and the materials and resources available. The controversy model involves eight steps: (1) introducing the controversy; (2) assigning groups and perspectives; (3) learning perspectives and preparing arguments; (4) presenting positions; (5) the actual controversy; (6) perspective reversal; (7) open discussion; and (8) group report. The skills used in a constructive controversy are designed to keep communication channels open, bring out facts and ideas, enhance perspective taking, and make sure everyone participates in a cooperative atmosphere. The teacher needs to emphasize these skills continually through observation, intervention, and processing. Adapting a curriculum can be accomplished using almost any subject area which involves higher levels of thinking and has no simple or obvious solutions to the problem. A controversy curriculum can be designed for a single class or multiple sessions. Once the topic is selected, the teacher needs to organize materials, including a collection of general background information articles. To differentiate the controversy, the teacher writes a position statement which gives an overview of the controversy and specifically states the assigned role for each perspective. Depending on the teacher's objectives, there are many options for designing the group report. (JMK)

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Instructional Strategies for Constructive Controversies

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Instructional Strategies for Constructive Controversies

Renee Petersen and Margaret Tiffany

Constructive controversy has many benefits in the classroom (Johnson, 1979; Johnson & Johnson, 1979). As teachers we have been able to put theory into practice and have seen the results in terms of heightened interest in the subject, increased participation from normally reticent or bored students, motivation to seek out further information, greater understanding of the subject at hand and a feeling of being involved in the process of learning with the skills to make effective and creative decisions.

The benefits of a constructive controversy, however, depend on the way the teacher structures the controversy, the skill level of the students, and the materials and resources available. Controversy and conflict resolution skills are not inherent; students need to be taught these behaviors as well as to be experienced in the cooperative skills of leadership, trust and communication. These latter skills are the foundation for constructive controversy. It is advisable, therefore, that students have experiences working in cooperative groups before implementing a controversy.

A controversy lesson is not likely to be successful if the teacher simply assigns a topic and tells the students to discuss the different points of view. Without the careful structuring and skills teaching, the controversy often becomes destructive when students reach an impasse while arguing one specific point or only one side of the issue. The proper structuring aids students in examining all sides of an issue and

in handling conflicts skillfully as they arise.

Thus, the teacher's role becomes a critical element in ensuring the controversy is constructive rather than destructive. This role can be broken into two major components. The first component is to structure the controversy itself and to communicate this structure clearly to the students through the daily task statements and the goal structure of working cooperatively.

The second component of the teacher's role deals with processes and can be broken down into several elements. They are to: (1) teach the appropriate behaviors critical to a constructive controversy each day; (2) use intervention strategies with groups while they are in process; and (3) reinforce the skills through daily monitoring of the groups and through appropriate feedback during processing at the end of the session.

In this section of the paper, we will outline the controversy model we use in the classroom and then detail each of the 8 steps. The model incorporates the teacher's role of structuring the controversy through the task statement and the goal structure. Next, we will discuss the specifics of the teacher's role in teaching controversy skills, intervention strategies, and monitoring and processing techniques.

The second section of the paper will discuss guidelines for adapting a curriculum for a constructive controversy. Finally, we will include a sample lesson plan written for a research study on controversy and cooperation.

Controversy Model

Several teachers and social psychologists have used the controversy model in classrooms (Johnson, 1979; Lowry & Johnson, 1981; Smith, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981). The outline of the controversy model is as follows:

1. Introduce the controversy
2. Assign groups and perspectives
3. Learn perspective and prepare arguments
4. Present positions
5. Actual controversy
6. Perspective reversal
7. Open discussion
8. Group report

Step 1: Introduce the Controversy

Once the topic has been selected and the materials gathered, the teacher can introduce the controversy. The primary tasks in this phase are to clarify the problem, to explicitly present the different positions, and to pre-cue the group report. At this point the teacher is presenting an overview of the controversy, setting the stage for a problem-solving format, and assigning the group goal. One technique is to tell the students they are part of a problem-solving committee. Their task will be to get all the facts and as a committee analyze, integrate and synthesize the information into one group product.

Step 2: Assign Groups and Perspectives

The teacher now assigns students to heterogeneous groups of four.

Four students are needed in a group so there will be two students assigned to each perspective. The heterogeneity allows for more diverse resources within each group.

Since a spirit of togetherness is essential in a controversy, each group of four should choose a name. This naming activity is designed to develop a sense of belonging and a feeling of mutuality.

Next, the teacher assigns partners and then opposing positions. For example, in a controversy on pollution, two group members would be assigned to role play and support the pro environment position and two group members would be assigned to role play and support the pro industry position. To help students own their assigned roles, badges may be given to the partners which symbolize their perspectives.

Step 3: Learn Perspective and Prepare Arguments

The task for the students is to work with their partners on the assigned position to understand their perspective and to identify the facts, values and rationale represented by their perspective. They need to list the facts and opinions from their assigned material and list the consequences and implications for each fact.

Once the list is compiled, the students must prepare a summary position statement to be presented on the second day. At this time, students should also anticipate possible counter-arguments to prepare each other for the actual controversy. These tasks can be accomplished by partners working together on learning their information. Another technique is to assign "expert" groups which are homogeneous information groups. Partners with the same information work cooperatively in

groups of four to learn their perspective.

It is appropriate, at this point, to tell the students there are more resources available. The teacher may want to allow time for further information gathering for their assigned perspective.

Step 4: Presenting Positions

Students meet in their original groups for the role play. During this step, each pair, in a specific amount of time, articulates their position to the pair with the opposing perspective. Each side presents a statement of their position and a summary of their supporting facts. No argument is allowed at this point, but either side may request clarification of unclear information.

Step 5: The Actual Controversy

Before students begin to argue their perspective, the teacher should pre-cue the upcoming role reversal. This is to ensure careful listening because later students will have to argue the opposite perspective based only on the information they have heard and notes they may have taken.

Now they are ready to argue their assigned position using their developing controversy skills. During the actual controversy, the students' focus should be on asking questions of their opposing partners. Questions such as: "What facts do you have to back that up?" or "Have you thought about ...?" or "Our position says ... what do you think of that?" or "What do you mean by ...?" or "Is this what you mean ...?" should help promote elaboration of facts, and differentiation of perspec-

tives. This is a time for open exchange of information so students can assimilate facts presented by the opposite side that are relevant to their argument and formulate and present counter-arguments.

If this step takes more than one period, on the second day expert groups or partners should meet again to exchange and pool newly acquired information. This is also a time to plot new strategies and arguments. Original groups should then meet once more to argue their perspectives. This series can be repeated as often as the teacher deems necessary and as long as an unlocking procedure is used each day.

This procedure is important because students are being asked to role play and it is necessary that they not become so involved in their role that they lose all perspective. This also allows the teacher to check on their listening skills and on individual learning.

Four possibilities of unlocking procedures are to have the students write on a sheet of paper the answer to the questions: (1) "Which side has the best arguments?" and list reasons to support their decision; (2) "Where do I really stand and why?"; (3) "What are the five most convincing arguments from the opposite perspective?"; and (4) fill out a five-point scale answering the question, "How sure am I of my position?"

Step 6: Perspective Reversal

In the role reversal, the partners will argue the opposite perspective as if they believe it. To help the students assume their new roles effectively, group members should exchange badges and possibly even

chairs. Before arguing their new perspective, partners or expert groups need to plan their arguments based on the information they heard during the role play. This role reversal is another technique for unlocking. Students are now ready to repeat Steps 4 and 5 in their new role.

Step 7: Open Discussion

Once both positions have been argued, and students have completed the role reversal step, it is time for open discussion of the controversy. During this step, students are instructed to drop their roles. To facilitate this, they put away their badges. While in their cooperative group, students individually select and discuss the arguments believed to be the most reasonable or the most sensible from both sides of the controversy. Then, as a cooperative group, they list facts from both perspectives and include rationale to back up their choices. Next the group compiles a list of alternative solutions and consequences. Using this list, the students must come to consensus on the controversy. Now they are ready to write the group report.

Step 8: Group Report

For the final step, each group writes a synthesis of the group's position which should reflect an understanding of the differing perspectives in an integrated report. It should include their explanation, rationale and recommendations for dealing with the controversy.

The Teacher's Role in Processing

The skills in a constructive controversy are designed to keep communication channels open; to bring out the facts and ideas; to enhance perspective taking and to make sure that everyone participates in a cooperative atmosphere within the controversy. The behaviors or skills to teach are (Johnson & Johnson, 1982; Smith, Johnson, & Johnson, 1981):

1. I am critical of ideas, not people.
2. I remember that we're all in this together.
3. I encourage everyone to participate.
4. I listen to everyone's ideas even if I don't agree.
5. I ask someone to restate what was said if I don't understand.
6. I try to understand both sides of the issue.
7. I have good reasons for changing my opinion.
8. I first bring out all the ideas then I put them together.

Observation

The teacher needs to emphasize continually these skills through observation, intervention and processing. To help the teacher and the students, a poster listing the specific behaviors can be placed in the room. The teacher can compose an observation sheet to be used while monitoring the groups containing the following behaviors: (1) contributes ideas; (2) paraphrases, clarifies for understanding; (3) summarizes; (4) asks for more rationale; (5) encourages others to participate; (6) criticizes ideas; (7) differentiates or disagrees; (8) integrates, synthesizes. This observation sheet will then be used as a basis for reteaching skills while groups are working and for processing at the end

of each session.

Intervention

The teacher may also need to intervene to maximize the controversy especially when students reach a consensus too quickly or have not considered all the arguments. There are a variety of techniques. The teacher can confront students with opposing viewpoints, point out disagreements in their arguments, or point out inadequacies in their reasoning. This is not to say the teacher should take sides, rather the teacher remains neutral, and directs the students to reconsider the issue.

If students are deadlocked over one point or one perspective, the teacher needs to induce students to consider alternatives from other points of view, praise individuals for changing their minds when confronted with new evidence and encourage the group to seek new information if needed, to reach consensus.

Processing

The teacher's role at the end of each session is to structure the processing time to further emphasize social skills. It is also a time for the students and the teacher to assess how well the group members worked together. The students need to recognize successful group performance, to correct any problems encountered, and to improve performance through setting positive guidelines for the next group activity. There are three techniques to accomplish this goal: (1) teacher feedback from the observation sheet; (2) individual examination of one's own group behavior; and (3) group analysis and goal-setting. Processing is strong-

est when all three techniques are combined but it is essential that teacher feedback or group sharing is done each day.

When the teacher processes with the class there are several rules to keep in mind. The feedback should be objective and based on the teacher's observations, specific and concrete with the emphasis on positive behaviors; and the focus kept on two or three of the behaviors. Daily progress can be charted and posted on a graph.

Individual processing is most easily achieved by a simple checklist which parallels the teacher's observation sheet. The students fill out the sheet before teacher feedback so they can compare their personal behaviors with the teacher's assessment.

In group processing, students first need to discuss group performance and then set behavioral goals for the next day. This can be accomplished through worksheets which each group fills out together or by groups sharing information orally.

One example of a worksheet is a group performance checklist which parallels the teacher's observation sheet. Another type has continuum statements focusing on controversy behaviors. One example of a continuum statement is "We criticized ideas, not people" with a five-point scale to check ranging from "most of the time" to "not at all." One can also have students process orally sharing positive statements about each member's performance. In this method, each group member states what he/she saw happening in the group and how group members contributed toward successful group work.

Finally, each group needs to set goals to improve their group's behaviors. The students should write down one or two specific goals

that their group will focus on the next day. This will be read by the group in the next session before they begin working to remind them of their set goals.

Curriculum Adaptation

Adapting a curriculum can be accomplished using almost any subject area which involves higher levels of thinking and has no simple or obvious solutions to the problem. One can design a controversy curriculum for a single class session or for multiple sessions.

The "simple" or one-session controversy is best used for introducing students to controversy and the skills involved. It can also be used to liven up an ordinary lesson. No actual curriculum adaptations need to be made. The teacher simply applies the controversy model to the curriculum.

An example of a one-day controversy could be taken from a reading lesson. If students have read the biography and autobiography of an individual, the teacher can assign the students to groups of four. One set of partners would defend the biographer's characterization as being accurate and the other set of partners would argue that the autobiography protrays the person more accurately. Or, if there is a basic conflict in the story, such as good versus evil, partners can be assigned one side of the conflict to defend. After role reversal, students must reach consensus in their groups with supporting reasons for their decision.

For longer controversies, the teacher must adapt the curriculum. In some cases, all the teacher needs to do is elaborate on the set cur-

riculum. In other cases, students may have been studying a particular subject that is related to a current social issue and the teacher must research and design the curriculum based on the background material already covered. Simply put, the teacher must organize the materials and differentiate the controversy into written position statements for each perspective.

Organize Materials

Once the topic is selected, the teacher then needs to organize the materials. First, a collection of general background information articles related to each perspective needs to be gathered. If the controversy is a current social issue, this information can be found in a library which usually has government documents, current magazines or journals, and files of newspaper clippings on the different perspectives. Librarians are excellent resources in researching and locating these kinds of materials.

Once this is completed, the teacher examines the primary resources to make sure there are balanced arguments for both perspectives. If no further information gathering is needed, the teacher divides the material by perspective and uses this information to write balanced position statements. The next step is to decide which of these materials should be given to the students. Depending on the age and ability level of the students, the teacher hands out the organized packets, or makes necessary adjustments. Some of the changes might include highlighting important facts or rewriting difficult materials. Included in this packet is a worksheet similar to the following one.

FACTS	CONSEQUENCES
1. _____	1. _____
2. _____	2. _____

Curriculum adaptations using this procedure have been written on a variety of topics including Acid Precipitation, Hazardous Waste Regulation, Coal as an Energy Source, Land Use in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, and The Timber Wolf: Should It Be Protected?

Position Statement

To differentiate the controversy, the teacher writes a position statement for each perspective which gives an overview of the controversy. It also specifically states what the assigned role is for each perspective. Below the position statement is a fact sheet, with information to support that perspective. To keep the controversy balanced, one must make sure that each side has the same number of arguments. The arguments on each sheet should counter each other if possible, otherwise the controversy could be too easily resolved or one side could have stronger arguments.

Depending on the skill level of the students, arguments may be listed in short statements or in a story format. When using a story format, one might have more than 2 positions: one can incorporate an

extreme and a moderate position for each perspective. Using this mode, students have to dig out the facts from the reading material and differentiate between fact and opinion. Caution is required when writing arguments in the story format to keep the story from becoming overly emotional. If this happens, students tend to get caught up in emotional aspects, ignore the facts, and get locked into their perspective.

Group Report

Depending on the teacher's objectives for the controversy, one has many options in designing the group report. This is an ideal time to make the curriculum relevant to current issues. Some of the possibilities are having students write to their congress representatives, letters to the editor or recommendations to citizen and government action committees.

Summary

Each step of the controversy model progressively commits the students to a high level of involvement. Assigning perspectives helps students to differentiate and identify with the issues. The role reversal unlocks the students from ownership to one position and allows them to identify with the opposite perspective. Throughout the role playing, they can analyze factual information using the controversy model as a challenge to their personal values. The group report is a way for students to integrate the information and make decisions about complex issues.

The benefits of a constructive controversy depend on the way the

teacher structures the controversy, the skills of the students and the materials available. When these elements are blended the teacher can foster cognitive development, improve academic achievement and develop the social skills which are necessary for dealing with controversy.

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